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ABSTRACT

The Rita Christian School on Majuro in the Republic of the Marshall Islands is a comprehensive preK-8 program that has successfully combined factors that contribute to an effective school program for the Pacific region. Factors contributing to the school's success are community involvement, strong leadership, a committed and well-trained staff, year-round scheduling, and an effective language teaching program. Pacific Islanders' traditional views of authority are often detrimental to community involvement, but Rita Christian School was built by the church congregation, fueled by its belief that education's primary purpose is to instill Christian values. Pacific Islanders respond to good leadership but tend to accept ineffective leadership rather than challenge it. Therefore, leadership must be strong, and the principal of Rita Christian has fulfilled this role. Staff development opportunities at the school include weekly teachers' meetings that focus on curriculum and teaching, networking, mentoring, and a collaborative training partnership between school and local government. A change to year-round scheduling improved attendance and learning retention and provided opportunities for remedial help and a sense of continuity. Although English is the common language, its introduction takes place in a 2-year bilingual preschool environment that supports the students' home language. In following this school's model, Pacific communities might focus on school purpose to increase community involvement, strong leadership development, staff training, year-round scheduling, and the timing and quality of the introduction of English as the medium of instruction. (SAS)

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ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE IN MAJURO, RMI

By Tim Donahue*

There is little question as to what factors contribute to an effective school. Community involvement, good leadership, a committed and well-trained staff, and responsive scheduling are all well-documented aspects of successful schools. In the Pacific region, an additional crucial element is an effective language program because English is the medium of instruction, and fluency in it is a necessity for higher education. The difficulty, of course, is combining all these characteristics to form a comprehensive program.

One successful example can be found at Rita Christian School on Majuro in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), where these factors have come together in a way that is uniquely Pacific. The school offers classes from pre-school through grade 8. All students are welcome at the school; there is no entrance testing to screen out anyone. The majority of the school's first graduating class, together since the school's beginning in 1991, passed the RMI high school entrance examination and achieved placement in the advanced coursework section. In the school's short history, its students' test scores have placed Rita Christian among the top four schools in the RMI. Rita Christian students also consistently outscore peers from other schools on standardized tests that measure proficiency in Marshallese, even though the school emphasizes English as the medium of instruction.

It may be useful to examine factors that have led to Rita Christian School's success: community involvement, strong leadership, staff development opportunities, year-round scheduling, and an effective language teaching program. This paper looks at how Rita Christian School has combined these elements and asks if there are lessons learned that can help Pacific public schools achieve similar levels of effectiveness.

Community Involvement

To increase community involvement is challenging in the Pacific region for several reasons. For one thing, people hold traditional notions of leadership, in which direction is expected from those in authority. The idea of a community taking control or even involving itself in school governance, therefore, can be an uncomfortable concept. If the government has vested authority over school operations through a department of education and its school principals, then many Pacific Islanders feel that the principal should be the person who takes charge of the school. Community involvement might be viewed as disrespect toward designated authority, a stance that few islanders choose to take.

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Also, the likelihood of a community's involvement increases when there is consensus about education's purpose. Historically, support for education in the United States has been based on the beliefs that education furthers democratic participation and that it provides individuals with economic opportunities. Neither of these notions is well developed in the Pacific, where democracy sometimes uncomfortably coexists with traditional leadership and where economic advancement through education is limited to a very small minority. Formal public education in the Pacific is an imposed system and has been accepted as such. Unfortunately, among residents, there is little expectation for community involvement in education.

One exception is the parochial school system. In the U.S., with the secularization of education and the separation of church and state, Americans tend to forget that public education was originally based on the thought that a good education maintains spiritual values. This concept still operates in parochial schools throughout the Pacific. As an example, the church community that sends its children to Rita Christian School believes that education's primary purpose is to instill Christian values.

With that simple but clear purpose fueling the congregation, the members of Rita Christian Church mobilized to build an elementary school in 1991. With little outside assistance, the group constructed two three-story buildings with classrooms for pre-school to grade 8. Because land is limited on an atoll such as Majuro, the school buildings were built in clusters around the church and include living quarters for faculty from off-island.

What is interesting, and perhaps typically Pacific, about Rita Christian School is that once the complex tasks of gathering resources and construction were finished, community involvement diminished. Reverting to tradition, the community deferred to the authority of Pastor and Principal Enja Enos to determine the school's instructional content and operations. Reverend Enos reports that community members respond enthusiastically to requests for assistance, but they do not initiate activities.

Strong Leadership

If this is indeed typical of Pacific schools, then the role of leadership is especially crucial. Islanders respond to effective leadership, but tend to accept ineffective leadership rather than challenge it. Without the principal's commitment to education, little commitment can be expected from the community. At Rita Christian School, Rev. Enos has provided steadfast guidance. His education, training, and conviction enable him to provide the type of consistent leadership that is respected in the community. He exemplifies the Pacific ideal of a person who has authority and has accepted the responsibility wholeheartedly.

Staff Development Opportunities

A mark of Rev. Enos' effective leadership is his ability to develop his teaching staff into a community of learners. A well-trained and committed staff is vital for school success. At Rita Christian School, staff members share a commitment to spiritual values, and therefore all have a common goal. To ensure the constant improvement of teaching skills, the principal stresses staff development. Most of the Rita Christian School faculty meet certification requirements, but those who do not are encouraged to take courses that lead to certification. The school assists by paying registration fees and holding weekly teachers' meetings that focus on curriculum and teaching. In addition, several teachers live at the school, so there is time for informal networking: Senior staff members can help newer teachers develop skills. Rev. Enos has also taken advantage of staff development opportunities provided by the RMI Ministry of Education. His initiative was welcomed, and a collaborative training partnership has been established between the school and the local government.

Year-Round Scheduling

Three years ago, Rita Christian School began operating on a year-round schedule: four quarters separated by two-week breaks, a two-week Christmas vacation, and a month-long break in July. The issue was proposed to parents, but they were willing to let the school decide. The single complaint has been from parents who have children in other schools as well as Rita Christian School. They contend that the difference in school schedules disrupts plans for family activities. For the most part, however, parents have accepted the year-round scheduling.

Both teachers and administrators are convinced of the benefits: Attendance is higher with a year-round schedule; retention of learning is higher; there is less need for review since the students are away from their studies for shorter periods of time. Also, with the year-round system, teachers have opportunities to provide remedial help as soon as it is needed. Students who are falling behind are tutored during the two-week breaks between quarters, rather than having to wait all year for summer school. Student and teacher burnout is also alleviated with the

year-round, four-quarter schedule. There is a consistency to the schedule that both students and teachers seem to enjoy. Finally, for a small school that shares facilities with a church, the schedule provides some flexibility when church activities take priority. If, for example, a funeral is being held at the church and the school must close for the day, then the day is made up at the end of the quarter, rather than getting tacked onto the end of the school year. What the year-round schedule seems to have accomplished for Rita Christian School is a greater sense of continuity, for both teachers and students. At the same time, the schedule allows the school to make changes to accommodate church activities, which reinforces the school's central tenet—to instill and reinforce church values.

Effective Language Teaching Program

There are several reasons for the success of Rita Christian School's language program. One reason is the staff's multi-culturalism, with teachers hailing from Fiji, Pohnpei State, Chuuk State, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. English is the common language among the staff, so students are exposed daily to English as a communication system. More important, however, is the students' introduction to English in a bilingual pre-school environment. Rita Christian School is fortunate to have an experienced early childhood educator heading its pre-school and kindergarten program. Along with a Marshallese assistant, the teacher, a woman from Fiji, has the opportunity to introduce English as an alternative language system to students during pre-school—two very formative years. With a foundation in English established early, students are better prepared for English literacy than students who are placed in an English language environment directly from a Marshallese one.

Conclusions

Can generalizations be made from this overview of Rita Christian School? One observation is the need to focus on a school purpose. The traditional American focus on long-range educational benefits is not necessarily a primary concern. The parents of children attending Rita Christian School know very well why they are sending their children there—it is the value system that the school upholds. Other considerations are secondary.

Pacific communities might focus on the desired behaviors and values of students as the defining purpose for education. Once consensus on school purpose has been reached, community involvement should increase. Involvement might follow Pacific patterns rather than typical U.S. approaches, and these variations should be honored as appropriate. School leadership will probably determine alternative types of community involvement.

The importance of strong leadership is a clear lesson to be learned from Rita Christian School. Rev. Enos' leadership directs community involvement and staff development and keeps the school's teachers and students performing at high standards. Efforts at leadership development should be encouraged throughout the Pacific region. The mechanics of bureaucratic leadership are not of greatest importance, however. For leadership in the Pacific, acknowledging and assuming responsibility is central to gaining the respect and involvement of the community.

Another important point that is well illustrated at Rita Christian School is the value of staff development. Leadership plays an important role in maintaining a positive staff attitude toward enhancing teaching skills. Being aware of training opportunities, encouraging staff participation, and providing time for staff interaction and follow-up help to strengthen a school's staff.

The benefits that Rita Christian School has reaped due to year-round scheduling might help other Pacific schools with scheduling. The "nine-month school year with three months off" system was developed in 19th century America, when children were needed at home during the summer to help with farm work. The schedule was created in response to the needs of farming families and communities. There is no reason why Pacific schools cannot be similarly responsive to local situations, as Rita Christian School has demonstrated.

Finally, Rita Christian School has come up with a solution to one of the biggest obstacles to student achievement in the Pacific—the introduction of English as the medium of instruction. There is often a perception that parochial schools are successful because of immersion, the total use of English from day one. Rita Christian School does not support that model. Rather, English is carefully introduced and supported by the students' home language during the early education years. It is the quality and timing of introduction to English, rather than the amount that makes the difference in later success.

Rita Christian School has successfully combined many of the factors that contribute to high student achievement levels. The school operates with a clear sense of purpose and illustrates that good education must reflect the community it serves, honoring and incorporating the community's strengths and modes of action.

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